

24th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.30.16
Scripture:

Kevin is an inmate in the house of correction, and a student in the creative writing class there that Hannah and I teach. The class has met three times, and three times, at the end of it, Kevin (which is not his real name) has been the last one to leave the room—the slowest to slide his chair back under the table around which we all sit, the slowest to make it to the door and then through it, into the hallway where two officers wait to pat each inmate down before letting them back into the long corridors that lead to the several different pods.

They have to be patted down during each transition over the course of the day—and I'm glad of that fact when they leave our room. After all, I might have lost count of the pens that they're allowed to use when in our class. I might have forgotten how many we passed out in the beginning, or forgotten to count them before they begin to file out into the hallway. Caught up in the human interaction that makes this whole endeavor seem worth it, it might have slipped my mind to be prudent. And they have to leave those pens behind because, hard plastic, they can be used as a weapon—which a couple of them play at in class, poking each other in mostly mock-aggression, trying to make light of the true fact that none of them is to be trusted.

Imagine being someone whom everyone knows not to trust.

But what if you're trustworthy and you're just thrown in with all these others who aren't? Or what if you mean to be trustworthy, are trying to become trustworthy, even though everyone knows you'll screw that up too?

Everyone knows it, especially you.

Not that there are good odds they could hide contraband. They all wear loose blue outfits, shirts and pants that are like pajamas or scrubs, but without the implied expertise that comes with scrubs. There is no power imputed in these clothes, no authority or respectability.

The plain blue sneakers with Velcro enclosures make matters worse. These are shoes that old people wear in nursing homes or toddlers wear in nursery school. To be a grown man, healthy enough to have landed your own life in the toilet, strong enough to have to be walled in, and to be stuck wearing shoes with Velcro enclosures because you can't even be trusted with shoelaces: that's low.

Many of the inmates leave them un-Velcro-ed.

You do what you can.

This is a twisted rope of swagger and shuffle, of pride and shame. These guys are so tough they can endure all these humiliations. You know, you have to be pretty tough to live through humiliation. I watched as boats passed my boat last week on the Charles River. Those fast rowers are tough; this moderate one may be tougher. You have to be pretty strong to haul around your own evident folly, your own easy-to-spot idiocy.

Those are their words, not mine.

“I’m in jail because I’m an idiot,” one inmate stumbled on as a conclusion to his monologue of self-exploration following his having shared what he’d written as homework. It was “flow-etry” — sort of rap, sort of poetry — about his heroin use. He laughed at his self-name-calling — “I’m in jail because I’m an idiot.” Haha, because anything else would be too painful.

“What’s folly?” another asked me after I used the word in reference to something we’d read.

“Foolishness,” I said. “Not being able to get out of your own way.”

“Oh, yeah, folly,” he said. “I know about that.”

Kevin has singled himself out in my sight.

This is our second eight-week course — Hannah’s and mine; and in both cases there have been two or three inmates who have. They engage the poetry that Hannah mostly provides as if it might matter, as if poetry might make a difference — somehow, somehow. They give a go at the writing assignments that they’re free not to do.

I mean, this isn’t a course for credit, after all; and there are no grades on the line. Really, Hannah and I, and the course in general, all have no authority over them, no authority at all beyond what they lend us. Sure, the more programs they engage in while in prison might bear out to shorten their sentences. But they could just come and ride it out, do what they’ve probably done in every classroom they’ve ever been in — spitballs from the back row.

The ones who single themselves out in my sight take up the task, if only because, well, what else is there to do, and, really, what could it hurt? Okay, their fellow inmates might tease them. They might expose themselves in their writing — a boxer exposing his soft sides to the kidney punch that is sure now to come. Kevin, just last week, admitted to being clammy with sweat all over for having read the short piece that he’d written.

He has many tattoos, detailed and full-color, up and down his arms, up and down his neck. He spikes his hair and has the teeth of someone who had other things on his mind, which I know because he smiles a fair amount. He's trying to change things. He's trying to get his feelings back. Twice he's said he used to have them—feelings, but hasn't for a long time.

The last one out the door again this Tuesday, he moved toward it, a shuffling blue bulk. Then Hannah said, "Bye, Kevin."

Surprised, he turned and said, "Bye. Thanks. See you next week."

Then, looking at me, he asked, "Hey, how'd your race go?" because I'd told him—told them all—about the hopeless task I was about to give a try. He was the only one who knew anything about crew, knew about the Head of the Charles. "You must be strong," he had said. "You get strong doing that."

"I'm getting there," I had said.

So, how had I done? How had it gone? "There's room for improvement," I said, bittersweet.

"But you *did* it," he said.

"Yes, I did."

One nagging question about this reading from scripture featuring Zacchaeus and Jesus is always around the seeing. The seeing: there's the fact that Zacchaeus was trying to *see* Jesus, to see who he was; but he couldn't because of the crowd and his small stature. There's the fact that he then climbed a tree to see him, and managed to do so because Jesus was going to pass that way. There's the fact that Jesus *looked* up then and saw him, even spoke to him: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." There's the fact that all in the crowd *saw* their connection and began to grumble because they knew something about Zacchaeus that Jesus seemed not to. And there's the fact that Zacchaeus had something he wanted to show Jesus, saying to him, "*Look*, I will give to the poor..."

Or is it, "*Look*, I give to the poor?"

More on *that* later, meanwhile, what is all this seeing about?

It's interesting to me that the crowd would make it so Zacchaeus couldn't see Jesus—and it gives two explanations for this. One is that Zacchaeus was short, and the other is that he was small in stature. These can mean the same thing, of course. This could be redundant. But the two together might also suggest something more. I mean, maybe the crowd made it so

Zacchaeus couldn't see Jesus because Zacchaeus was too short to see over all those heads. But maybe also the crowd made it so Zacchaeus couldn't see Jesus because Zacchaeus was short in social stature, thus the people of the crowd actively (if not entirely consciously) closed him out.

Maybe the crowd didn't want to let Zacchaeus see Jesus, was reacting against Zacchaeus *wanting* to see Jesus. Haven't you ever been in some position of waiting, in a crowd that's not quite a line but really should be a line so we can each be sure everyone gets their turn in due order?

And along comes someone who's all elbows and eagerness and maybe entitlement, so you press your shoulder into the shoulder of the person beside you, someone you don't even know but who's also been patiently waiting his turn?

You're not about to let this upstart in—especially not if the upstart is known also to be a jerk. And Zacchaeus was known to be a jerk. Worse, actually: according to the translation we heard, he was the chief tax collector.

Tax collectors were Jews but who worked for the empire, so in a certain sense they were traitors, Uncle Toms among the people Israel. What's more, tax law was full of license and loopholes; collectors could, to a degree, set their own terms, collecting what was owed Rome but tacking some on top so they could pay themselves, even gauging people as they chose. And what's still more is that, in the original Greek, "chief tax-collector" makes use of a word that elsewhere is translated "ruler," which is not a good thing according to this gospel.

Luke: this is the gospel that features the story of a beggar named Lazarus and the rich man at whose gate he begged—Lazarus eventually ending up in heaven and the rich man eventually ending up in torment.

This is the gospel of the rich ruler who, having kept all the commandments all his life, wanted to know if there was anything more he needed to do in order to inherit eternal life, but who didn't actually want to do what he was told—to sell all his goods, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Jesus on the way.

This is the gospel of the parable of the rich fool, that man whose fields produced abundant crops and so, when presented with this problem as to storage of all his goods, said to himself, "Self..." having apparently no one else to talk to. Haha! Joke's on him. So he said to himself, "Self..."

Rich people: these are the ones who, according to Luke, are closed out from the kingdom of heaven. Rulers: these are the ones who, according to Luke, never manage to see what is right in front of their eyes, that in Jesus the kingdom of God has come near. So, we as readers and hearers of Luke know exactly what to expect when this ruler Zacchaeus comes along; we know exactly what to expect when not just any tax collector but the *chief* tax collector comes along. We join the crowd, we readers, we hearers. We close him out. So, get set to hiss. Get set to boo.

Well, we didn't foresee the sycamore, did we?

Zacchaeus was clever, and he wasn't proud. Rich though he was, ruler though he was, he wasn't too haughty to scramble up a tree. We've got to give him that.

What Zacchaeus saw when he really saw who Jesus was is something always worth repeating, so I will repeat it again today. To see Jesus as he really is, is to see him as God, to see that Jesus is God-like. It is to recognize that Jesus is not merely a nice guy and not merely a wise teacher and not merely a charismatic preacher but, in the words of the Christmas carol, very God of very God.

Yet to see it just in this way is, yes, to say something cool about Jesus, but hardly much more. Really, if all there is to this revelation is that Jesus is God-like, then good for Jesus, but what about the rest of us?

To get to what's actually profound about this is to read the equation in the other direction, that not only is Jesus is God-like but also that God is Jesus-like.

For such is the case with equations like this one: if they're true in one direction, then they're true in the other. If it's true that $2+3=5$, then it's also true that $5=2+3$. So if it's true that Jesus is God-like, then it's also true that God is Jesus-like; and *thw* means that God is *not* like lots of other things people say God is like.

Jesus is kind; therefore God is kind

Jesus is vulnerable; therefore God is vulnerable.

Jesus is truthful; therefore God is truthful.

Jesus takes accusation and returns grace; therefore, God withstands accusation and pours forth grace.

Jesus empties himself of all glory, all honor, and for our sake. God is, therefore, similarly kenotic for our sake.

Jesus is intolerant of injustice; therefore, God is intolerant of injustice.

Jesus' anger is for deception and abuse of power; therefore, God's anger is for deception and abuse of power.

Jesus judges, but isn't punitive; therefore, God judges but isn't punitive.

Truly, to see who Jesus is, is to see who God is. And to see who God is, is to see past the machinations of the powers and principalities that pretend at proclaiming God, to see beyond the many-layered roof of the constructed worlds of human making and managing and control, and to rejoice beneath the wide, high sky of miraculous possibility—the cosmos, the creation, and their almighty God.

I bet this is what Zacchaeus was trying to see—that Jesus is God-like so perhaps to see him is to see God. I'd be less willing to bet that he did indeed see it. Moses, after all tried to see God, asked to see God, and instead got hid by God in the cleft of a rock because God knew that no mortal could survive seeing God, not God in God's entirety, not God in all God's glory. But what we can safely bet on is that Zacchaeus was *seen*—*seen* by Jesus, *seen* by God; and, you know, maybe this was just as crucial.

This relates to another persistent question about this story—an either/or question, because you can read it two ways. You can read this as either a conversion story or a revealing story, a story of repentance or a story of honest recognition. Indeed it has been translated two ways, as in the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version.

We heard the latter this morning, because that's what I nearly always use—the NRSV. It reads of Zacchaeus' words, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor..." And this lends to a classic reading of the story—that this is one of repentance. Jesus has lunch at Zacchaeus' house; the crowd reveals to the hearer of the story, and perhaps to Jesus passing through town, that Zacchaeus is a sinner; and then Zacchaeus is moved to repentance, and promises to give half his possessions to the poor and to make right his possible past acts of defrauding people. And now we all know—hearers of, and characters in, the story—that this is truly repentance because he had been a sinner but now he'll change his ways.

But the RSV has it a little different. "'Behold Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold," which lends to a much

more interesting reading of the story—because he is already doing his part, and yet it's unrecognized. He is already the man other versions have him converting so to be. *Already* he is giving half of his goods to the poor. *Already* he is making right by the gauging built into the system that incentivizes gauging.

No matter: Zacchaeus is a hated man. He benefits from a system that is built on fraud. Sure, worse is thought about him than is actually the case. He's been wrongly accused, will perhaps continue to be wrongly accused, will perhaps be wrongly accused his whole life long. People will make judgments of him that are harsher than is right. Join the club. Of whom is that not the case? You take it. You just take it. And you hope that, somewhere along the way, someone will stop and actually see you for the human being you are, or the one you mean to be, or the one you would be if things were actually different.

Then, maybe, if someone did that, things might actually be different. That might actually *make* the difference. That—to be seen as a human, to be recognized as human: that might be all the change you need.

This Saturday, the congregations of Berkshire County will gather in a show of love for, and faithfulness with, those whose lives are affected, and in some cases devastated, by the opioid crisis that is gripping the area. We in the Pittsfield catchment find ourselves in the 5th most affected area in the country when it comes to opioid abuse. Ahead of us are Elmira, NY; Flagstaff, AZ; Enid, OK; and Wilmington, NC.

Our vigil will be on the church steps next Saturday at one o'clock, and will continue into Lee (as people can) for a larger vigil at two o'clock. A final step in the pilgrimage will be in Pittsfield's Park Square on Sunday at three o'clock. This is to honor the terrible fact that the trauma of addiction is playing out all over the county, isolating and demoralizing and dehumanizing as it is. I'd hazard the guess that most of the men I've met in jail are there because of some relation to drugs—either selling it, or abusing it, or committing crimes to procure it. So they're addicts, and they're criminals. They're also human; they're moreover human. And it's our task as the church to seek that humanity out, to see it, to recognize it, and to respond to it in kind.

If you are addicted to opioids, you are a beloved human being.

If you are close with someone who is addicted to opioids, you are a beloved human being.

If you are a follower of Christ, or you *mean* to be, then you are to do as Christ did, and to see in those people whose humanity is open to question the very people Christ most urgently connected with as a fellow member of the human race.

Notice, please, that this encounter with Zacchaeus is the last of Jesus' public ministry. From here, according to Luke, Jesus would go on to Jerusalem, would enter his final week, would submit to wrongful arrest and endure false accusation. He would do this perhaps having been inspired by Zacchaeus, a man likewise enduring false accusation; and he would do this for the sake of those facing accusation — whether wrongly or not. After all, not everyone undergoing punishment is innocent of the original charge. But in God's sight, by God's grace, all that comes to grace. Restoration, reconciliation, atonement are more powerful than anything we could do to screw it up.

And screw it up, we will. To some degree, we're all hopeless cases, laboring under systems that are hopelessly corrupt.

To recognize the truth of this is either to grow cynical or to fall into faith.

Cynicism has its charms. It's self-satisfying. It's unassailable. With disappointment baked into it, it can't be disappointed, can't be dashed.

But faith — that all that is, is the catchment of God who is active for our sake that life might abound — is in my experience simply more fun, more open to possibility and surprise, to delight and joy, to gratitude and wonder and awe and life, to disappointment (yes) but then to further delight.

There was a time when I'd have thought, then, that the choice is ours. Between cynicism or faith: the choice is ours. But that time is past. I no longer believe that. Sure, we might *think* we have such a choice. Each of us living out the individualistic myth that is life in the modern world, we might *think* we have a choice between the two — cynicism or faith. But all of us together are a testament to faith — its enduring truth, its mysterious resilience, its persistent call to action and to repose, to being human when so much in life would have us be otherwise.

We like to think we have a choice. But God insists. God *insists*.

Thanks be to God.